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GERALD L. K. SMITH AND THE HUEY P. LONG FUNERAL ORATION

HOWARD DORGAN

In 1935 the assassination of Huey P. Long violently upset the political equilibrium of Louisiana. This essay explores the means by which an orator, Gerald L. K. Smith, attempted to use this event to his advantage. In addition it is a study of an epideictic oration which assumed much of the nature of a deliberative address.

On September 12, 1935, Rev. Gerald Lyman Kenneth Smith, speaking to a crowd of several thousand grief-stricken mourners who had gathered from the crossroads, backwoods, and bayous of Louisiana, delivered the funeral oration for his fallen leader, Huey P. Long. This eulogy was the culmination of a short nineteen months of concentrated service to the senator as the chief organizer of Long's Share-Our-Wealth movement. It was this movement—this social and political phenomenon rising out of the economic chaos of depression and recovery—that Long had apparently hoped to ride in an ascension to the White House.

THE MOVEMENT

The Share-Our-Wealth idea had possessed some appealing features, especially for indigent agrarians. It had officially promised to "limit poverty by providing that every deserving family shall . . . possess not less than \$5,000 free of debt."¹ It had promised to limit personal fortunes "to such few million dollars as will allow the balance of the American people to

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¹Huey P. Long, "Share Our Wealth: Principles and Platform" (A political pamphlet published by its author, 1935), p. 2.

share in the wealth and profits of the land."² It has promised old age pensions, veteran's benefits, and full employment via shorter working hours. And occasionally it had promised a "free higher education for all, with a mental test instead of a tuition test."³ In a letter to the writer, Gerald L. K. Smith summarized the Share-Our-Wealth philosophy as follows:

The real meaning of Share-Our-Wealth was based on the ideal of Huey Long that the wealth in the trees and the wealth in the ground and the wealth in the waterways and ocean shores should be shared with the people who lived on the ground.⁴

The formal organization of the Share-Our-Wealth Society was extremely simple but politically brilliant. Anyone could have been a member, entitled to wear a badge, merely by signing a card. Local groups were encouraged to organize for discussion of Share-Our-Wealth principles, but there were no dues, no central organization, no national officers—just a mailing list of potential voters.⁵ This was to be a movement of faith in an idea, and Long was to represent the promises of that idea.

In February, 1934, because of "radical" views unacceptable to his wealthy congregation,⁶ Gerald Smith had been asked to resign his position as minister of the Kingshighway Christian Church in Shreveport, Louisiana. He subsequently became the chief organizer of the Share-Our-Wealth Society. In the formal announcement of his resignation Smith stated, "I have felt for some years that I was destined to be a part of movements larger and of wider purport than a local community."⁷

THE MAN

Smith was, at age thirty-six, an experienced promoter, with much of that experience gained by promoting himself.

²Long, p. 2.

³Gerald L. K. Smith, "How Come Huey Long?" *The New Republic*, LXXXII (February 13, 1935), 15.

⁴A personal letter to the writer, December 13, 1969.

⁵The eventual membership in Share-Our-Wealth clubs is unknown, but in the spring of 1935 Long was receiving as many as "60,000 letters a week" which related to Share-Our-Wealth issues. See T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 698.

⁶Williams, p. 699.

⁷*Shreveport Times*, February 13., 1934, p. 9.

He worked his way through Valparaiso University . . . majoring in literature, Biblical history, and dramatics. He was graduated at 19 . . . and felt the preaching urge descend upon him.⁸

For a time he seems to have held no regular pastorate, but to have substituted for ministers who were absent from their pulpits. His first "call" came from a church in Deep River, Indiana, "where his Billy-Sunday-like evangelism won him 38 new converts and baptisms within a month."⁹ Then, in 1922, he attended a church convention in St. Louis, and a "rousing 'come-to-Jesus' performance gained him a post in the Seventh Christian Church of Indianapolis,"¹⁰ from which he quickly advanced to the larger Butler University Church in the same city. Then, in 1928, at age thirty, he was promoted to a position as minister of the largest church of his denomination in Louisiana, the Kingshighway Christian Church in Shreveport.

In addition, Smith's promotional talents evidently brought him in contact with the Louisiana labor movement, which he subsequently served as chaplain of the State Federation of Labor. According to T. Harry Williams, it was thought this work with the unions that the minister became allied with Long:

One of his [Smith's] labor friends took him to New Orleans to see Huey, who had previously met him and knew about his troubles with his congregation. Huey realized that he could use the oratorical talents of the minister to make converts to Share Our Wealth.¹¹

So on the evening of February 12, 1934, Smith resigned his position at the Kingshighway Christian Church and delivered a bitter denunciation of certain influential powers in Shreveport, including the *Shreveport Times*, Radio Station KWKH, and the Standard Oil Company.¹² He subsequently joined forces with Long and soon became the stellar attraction on the senator's sound-caravan which promoted the Share-Our-Wealth Society.

⁸"Gerald L. K. Smith," *Current Biography*, 1943 (New York: H. W. Wilson Company), 707.

⁹*Current Biography*, 1943, p. 707.

¹⁰Herbert Harris, "That Third Party," *Current History*, XLV (October, 1936), 85.

¹¹Williams, p. 699.

¹²For the content of this speech of resignation see *American Progress* (Hammond, Louisiana), February 22, 1934, p. 2.

H. L. Mencken once described Smith as the "gustiest and goriest, the loudest and lustiest, the deadliest and damndest orator ever heard on this or any other earth."¹³ A few years later William Bradford Huie added these comments:

. . . no man's observation of America can be complete until he has watched Gerald L. K. Smith in action. The man has the passion of Billy Sunday . . . the fire of Adolph Hitler. Words gush from him like water from Moses' rock.¹⁴

But one of the best descriptions of the minister was provided by Herbert Harris who covered many of Smith's activities during the 1936 presidential campaign when the orator supported the third party candidate William Lemke:

He [Smith] cannot converse, he must orate. He needs room in which to swing his arms. He is a broad, husky, dynamic man, weighing more than 200 pounds. His mouth is big and mobile. . . . He doesn't drink or smoke but seems to take out the lack of such indulgences by chewing matches, gnashing them into bits between his very white teeth, and spluttering out the splinters.¹⁵

T. Harry Williams has observed that Smith copied many of the platform mannerisms and techniques employed by Long.¹⁶ The senator, for example, was skillful at obtaining audience involvement by calling for overt physical reactions from his hearers.¹⁷ Smith was apparently equally skillful. He frequently adopted two of Long's techniques. One was the device of asking the members of the audience to raise their hands if they felt that they did not possess their share of the nation's wealth. It seems doubtful that any of the impecunious rustics would have failed to respond to such a highly emotive query. The second device was simply a variation of the first. Smith would ask how many in his audiences did not have four suits of clothes. His audiences, reportedly, did not hesitate to admit this degree of penury; therefore, Smith—according to Pulitzer-Prize-Winning journalist Hodding Carter—would continue:

¹³From a reprint of a 1936 Baltimore *Evening Sun* column, supplied by Smith.

¹⁴William Bradford Huie, "Gerald Smith's Bid for Power," *The American Mercury*, LV (August, 1942), 145.

¹⁵Harris, p. 83.

¹⁶Williams, pp. 699-700.

¹⁷Williams, p. 418.

"I thought so—I thought so, brethern. Now all of you that ain't got three suits of clothes, raise your hands."

Again a thousand arms reach to the sky.

"Just like I knew, brethern. Oh, blessed are the poor, but what a row they have to hoe. Now all of you that ain't got two suits of clothes, raise your hands."

For a third time, the arms reach convulsively, almost triumphantly into the sky.

"Not even two suits of clothes. Oh, my brethern, J. P. Morgan has two suits of clothes. He has a hundred times two suits of clothes. And that ain't all. Now all of you that ain't got even one suit of clothes—one single suit of clothes that the pants match the coat—raise your hands."¹⁸

Carter reported that each time the hands shot skyward they denoted more of a sense of pride in belonging. Smith needed only to pass out the membership cards and they did belong—to the Share-Our-Wealth Society and to Huey Long.

Long's assassination on September 8, 1935, placed the Share-Our-Wealth movement in serious jeopardy, and as Gerald Smith prepared the eulogy for his fallen leader he was cognizant of the threat to the cause and to his position. As a consequence, he gave this funeral oration a twofold purpose, (1) to keep the movement alive by providing it with a martyr, and (2) to advance Gerald L. K. Smith to the forefront of that movement.

THE MOMENT

Prior to his assassination Long had been receiving considerable attention on the national scene, but he was encountering some stubborn resistance at home. Then, amid increased rumors that some members of the Long machine were deeply involved in corruption, United States Internal Revenue agents—allegedly with Roosevelt's encouragement¹⁹—began a close examination of the financial status of several state officials. Meanwhile,

¹⁸Hodding Carter, "How Come Huey Long?" *The New Republic*, LXXXII (February 13, 1935), 11.

¹⁹This has been a rather persistent allegation which has appeared in several secondary sources, e.g., Harnett T. Kane, *Louisiana Hayride* (New York: Willnam Morrow and Company, 1941), pp. 164-187. Smith, in personal letters to the Writer (October 23, 1969 and December 13, 1969) also repeated the charge.

Long had grown anxious over the amount of New Deal money flowing into his state, fearing its influence in the forthcoming state primary. In the moments just prior to his assassination the senator had been personally directing the creation of state legislation designed to stop this flow; therefore, after the assassination Louisiana was faced with an important decision, either to change her course and realign herself with the Roosevelt Democrats or to remain with the fallen Share-Our-Wealth standard in hope that other nationally known political figures might lift it to its former glory.

In addition, the headless political machine had to form ranks behind someone at the state level. O. K. Allen was the governor of the state, but his position had been only titular since Long continued to rule while in the Senate. Allen soon made it clear that he would not be vying for Long's vacated position of state influence.²⁰ However, there were four men who did aspire to elevated positions of power: Lieutenant Governor James A. Noe; the speaker of the Louisiana House of Representatives, Allen Ellender; New Orleans hotel owner, Seymour Weiss; and Public Service Commissioner, Wade Martin.²¹ These were only a few of the men whom Gerald Smith would need to convince if Louisiana were to continue her march behind the Share-Our-Wealth banner.

Smith devoutly desired such a continuance. After expanding his own title by announcing himself as the "national organizer and head of the Share-Our-Wealth societies,"²² Smith turned out press releases which stated that nothing had changed, that the Share-Our-Wealth movement was "by no means dead."²³ He issued proclamations, distributed leaflets, and sent telegrams, all in the name of Share-Our-Wealth. One of Smith's telegrams went to Joseph K. Byrns, speaker of the United States House of Representatives:

Facts have come to the attention of myself [Smith] . . . which convince me that the most subtle plot in American history was developed to destroy my chief and our leader, and these, if uncovered, will

²⁰*State Times* (Baton Rouge), September 11, 1935, p. 1.

²¹*State Times* (Baton Rouge), September 11, 1935, p. 1.

²²*Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), September 12, 1935, p. 3.

²³*Alexandria Daily Town Talk*, September 13, 1935, p. 6.

shake this country from center to circumference, involving personalities far beyond the imagination of the American public.²⁴

Smith even included himself as a possible victim of this alleged intrigue when he informed the press that he too had received a death threat.²⁵ No doubt Smith did not want such a "subtle plot" to be too far beyond the imagination of the American public.

On September 12, 1935, at 4:30 p.m., Long was to be buried and the roads to Baton Rouge had become so heavy with traffic that cars lined up for ten miles along the highways on the west bank of the river. Special trains brought thousands of additional mourners into the city. By 1:00 p.m., as Long's body lay in state in the capitol, the crowds on the grounds were estimated at from 50,000 to 200,000.²⁶ Newsboys hawked special funeral programs; vendors sold ice cream and soft drinks; and hundreds of spectators climbed into trees and onto the roofs of nearby buildings.

For hours the vast crowd, pressed together almost to the point of suffocation, waited in the broiling Southern sun. More than 200 persons fainted during the long wait. . . .²⁷

Several times, on the capitol steps and in the area around the grave, the crowd "overran police lines, pushed and shoved for positions of advantage, and seriously threatened to get completely out of control."²⁸

A reporter for the *Shreveport Times* told of seeing a small girl fall before the onrush of a hysterical segment of the crowd, only to be snatched up just in time by a policeman.²⁹ Frank Allen of the *Times-Picayune* described the frenzied behavior of some of the mourners who tore blossoms from the floral offerings.³⁰ Alan Coogan, United Press writer, reported the indecorous actions of a vendor who pushed through the crowd

²⁴*Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), September 12, 1935, pp. 1-3.

²⁵*New York Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 15.

²⁶*Morning Advocate* (Baton Rouge), September 13, 1935, p. 1.

²⁷*New York Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 15.

²⁸*Shreveport Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 1.

²⁹*Shreveport Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 5.

³⁰*Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), September 12, 1935, p. 2.

crying, "Ice cream sandwiches—ice cream sandwiches . . ."³¹ And F. Raymond Daniell of the *New York Times* pictured the breath-taking beauty of an estimated \$2,000 worth of flowers as seen from the lofty tower of the capitol.³²

At 4:00 the doors of the statehouse were closed to those mourners still waiting to file past the casket. Then at 4:25 the doors reopened and the funeral procession moved slowly down the forty-eight steps toward the open grave.

Off to the side of the procession a giant drum vibrated to a slow, melancholy march. Then the Louisiana State University band, bright in their purple and gold uniforms, took up the dirge.³³ Their music was "Every Man a King," and woven into the melody were strains of "Nearer My God to Thee" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." A silence fell over the crowd, broken only by occasional sobs. At the grave Rev. Smith opened the service with a brief prayer, then delivered his twenty-five minute funeral oration. As the body was lowered into the massive copper vault, the crowd again broke out of control and rushed toward the grave. State police drove the throng back with difficulty.

Frank Allen recorded that Smith read the eulogy.³⁴ Since newspaper accounts of the oration's content agree with each other and with the published versions of the text,³⁵ it would appear that Smith released copies to the press before or immediately after the event. This, of course, does not guarantee that the minister read the speech as published; however, the pride of authorship which Smith later demonstrated³⁶ would

³¹*State Times* (Baton Rouge), September 12, 1935, p. 1.

³²*New York Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 15.

³³*Shreveport Times*, September 13, 1935, p. 1.

³⁴*Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), September 13, 1935, p. 1.

³⁵The complete text of the speech was published in the *Congressional Record*, Vol. 80 (1936), p. 4095, and in the *American Progress*, September issue, 1935, pp. 1 and 3. In addition, Smith printed and distributed photographic copies of a handwritten manuscript of the speech. The writer possesses in his files one of these copies. The text published in the *Congressional Record* and the text distributed by Smith are identical, but the *American Progress* version occasionally varies slightly in phrasing. However, there are no substantive differences.

³⁶In addition to the publications previously mentioned, Smith also reprinted the speech in *The Cross and the Flag* (November, 1942), a magazine which the minister currently edits in Los Angeles, California.

seem to indicate that he would have been anxious to deliver the eulogy with fidelity to its manuscript.

THE MESSAGE

Smith performed the traditional labors of the eulogist. With undertoned but intense emotionalism he panegyricized the virtues of the son, the husband, the father, the politician, the statesman, and the citizen. He summarized the "noble attributes"; he consoled the relatives; he gave assurances of the deceased's spiritual salvation; and he closed with a recitation of the departed's favorite poem, William Henley's "Invictus." Nevertheless, the oration should not be viewed as a typical eulogy, for it assumed much of the nature of a deliberative address. The critic has previously noted that the speech appeared to have a twofold purpose: First, Long would be established as a martyr to the cause of Share-Our-Wealth, and next Smith would be identified as the heir apparent to the vacated position of leadership in the movement. If the above analysis is correct, then the Huey Long funeral oration should have demonstrated these motives in action. It is the writer's contention that such a demonstration did occur, that a take-up-the-torch theme predominated throughout the speech, and that Smith frequently evoked images designed to promote himself as Long's successor.

The eulogist prefaced the oration with a Biblical passage which led directly into the subject of martyrdom: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Then the introduction picked up this thought and quickly developed it into the central theme:

He fell in the line of duty. He died for us. . . . This untimely death makes restless the souls of us who adored him. We cannot be appeased. . . . The ideals which he planted in our hearts have created a gnawing hunger for a new order. This hunger pain . . . can only be . . . satisfied by the completion of that victory toward which he led us.⁸⁷

⁸⁷All quotations from the eulogy are taken from the version printed in the *Congressional Record*. The writer believes that this version was probably the one delivered since Smith has personally sanctioned it as such.

Therefore, by the end of the proem Smith had clearly established the take-up-the-torch theme and had introduced the martyrdom myth.

The orator did not, however, ever allow these ideas to slide into the background. Three times in the main body of the eulogy Smith again brought them to the forefront. Once he suddenly broke into the panegyrics to ask the question:

Can it be that God consented to this fate in order that by this dramatic exit he might retire from the battleground of political torture . . . while at the same time his torch was left to light our way?

Later Smith climaxed a long list of encomiums by crying: "This blood . . . shall seal our hearts together. Take up the torch, complete the task, subdue selfish ambition, sacrifice for the sake of victory." Then the orator told of a deathbed scene during which Long was alleged to have said, "O God, don't let me die; I have a few more things to do." Whereupon, Smith urged:

The work which he left undone we must complete. As one with no political ambition and who seeks no gratuities at the hand of the state, I challenge you, my comrades, to complete the task.

Now the eulogist spoke of future blessings: Long's greatness would be an ever expanding realization; unborn children would benefit from his genius and from his personal sacrifice; lesser men would no longer abuse him through their jealousies; and he would no longer be subject to willful misrepresentation. But in closing Smith again reminded the audience that "His was the unfinished symphony."

When Gerald Smith was selected to deliver Long's eulogy the rationale for the selection apparently had been that Smith was the minister closest to Long. Some members of the family it was alleged, wanted a Baptist minister to preside over the rites, since Long was Baptist.³⁸ But Seymour Weiss had made the announcement that Smith would officiate. Weiss later regretted that decision. The hotel owner was quoted as saying, "Choosing Smith for that speech was a great mistake. It made him. He

³⁸*Morning Advocate* (Baton Rouge), September 11, 1935, p. 6.

capitalized on it, glorified himself, had thousands of copies printed and distributed."³⁹

The entire occasion was perfectly designed to allow Smith to take the spotlight: Smith led the funeral procession to the grave; Smith was the only person to speak during the ceremony; Smith was the one to tell the mourners about the last moments of their leader; and Smith was the voice that cried: "Complete the task." In addition, the orator had the opportunity to reveal those intimate scenes when, allegedly, he and Long spoke privately and devoutly: "In answer to a query I made in his house one Sunday he replied: 'I know, Brother Smith, that the arms of God are about me every moment.'" He had the opportunity to demonstrate his own deep commitment to his leader by breaking into the eulogy with "O God, why did we have to lose him?" He had the opportunity to tell the multitude that he had "no political ambition" and sought "no gratuities at the hand of the state." But perhaps most important, Smith had the opportunity to say, "I was with him when he died. I said 'Amen' as he breathed his last."

This critic will stop short of an indictment of Smith as being *nothing more* than a rank opportunist: Some of the emotions of the eulogy may have been very honest. Certainly T. Harry Williams believes Smith to have been sincere in his expressions of admiration for his leader.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there were persons close to the situation who believed that the minister violated his role as a eulogist. Seymour Weiss, as an example, has already been mentioned. In addition, Senator Russell Long has been quoted as saying, "It was a political speech to himself [Smith]. He anointed himself as Long's successor."⁴¹ The judgment that this critic will make is that Smith—even though he may have been sincere in his praise for Long—was fully cognizant of the advantages present in the situation. Smith sought to use these advantages to promote himself and a movement. It was in this respect that the speech became both an epideictic and a deliberative address.

³⁹David H. Zinman, *The Day Huey Long Was Shot* (New York: Ivan Oblensky, Inc., 1965), p. 189.

⁴⁰Williams, p. 700.

⁴¹Zinman, p. 190.

In the second of the above objections—that of promoting the movement—the oration certainly failed. The Long machine not only cast away the Share-Our-Wealth banner but took aggressive steps to see that the movement received no further promotion in the state. In a letter to the writer Smith admitted that failure and colored the admission with his own peculiar bias: “There were nine political leaders, and I was the only one of the nine who refused to sell out the blood of our martyred Senator to the Roosevelt machine.”⁴²

In the first of these objectives—that of promoting himself—Smith met with qualified success. He did become the leader of what remained of the Share-Our-Wealth movement. However, he was like a general without an army. He could not even obtain the lists of Share-Our-Wealth members. He later claimed that the lists were burned—by Allen and Christenberry, Long’s personal secretary.⁴³ He hoped, no doubt, to carry the Share-Our-Wealth supporters with him in his 1936 campaign for William Lemke. Perhaps many of the 891,858 votes which Lemke received belonged to individuals who had signed cards when Smith asked if they owned their share of the nation’s wealth.

⁴²A personal letter to the writer, October 23, 1969.

⁴³A personal letter to the writer, October 23, 1969.